New racism or new Asia: what exactly is new and how does race matter?

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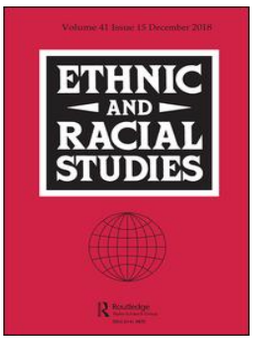

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New racism or new Asia: what exactly is new and how does race matter?

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ABSTRACT

This special issue offers important insights into race in Asia, insights first shared in a workshop "New Racism and Migration: Beyond Colour and the 'West'". My concluding commentary begins by positioning debates on race within the literature on "new racism". The workshop enhanced existing thinking on race pointing to the legacies of racial thought and of migration in Asia, the nature of comparison in racial thinking, and the ways in which race is entangled with class. It then outlines what is distinctive about Asia – the different histories of settler colonialism by European migrants and the indigeneity of racial thought but not of indigenous people. The paper ends by suggesting three ways forward in conceptualizing racism in Asia: engaging the materialities of race in Asia, recognizing how Asian race debates are influenced by global discourses and the need to draw on anti-racist politics to theorize race.

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In June 2020, people in many parts of the world were actively engaged in the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM). Importantly, BLM became a struggle for redressing the effects of racism globally. However, race has different histories and flavours in different parts of the world. This commentary explores how new racism was conceptualized in Europe, what this special issue brings to this literature – the specificities of Asian histories of race in the context of new diverse migration patterns, the role of comparison in racialization and of the intersections of class and gender with race. The paper ends by outlining some of the ways in which these debates on race in Asia can be extended by attending to the materiality of race produced in relation to capitalism, the circulating value of whiteness even in Asia and the importance of anti-racism in shaping scholarship on race.

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The murder of George Floyd in the US on 25 May 2020 sparked global protests against the devaluation of Black lives, lives shaped by the histories of slavery and its aftermaths. In the preceding months, COVID-19 had disrupted ways of living and revealed how a viral disease kills Black people disproportionately. Together, this politicized people around questions of race in new ways.

Asians, particularly the Chinese, have been targets of racism for a long time (Wertheim 1947) but discrimination intensified during the pandemic. Marking out the virus as "Chinese" led to attacks on Chinese international students, while travel bans, along with the economic slowdown caused by the pandemic, led to job losses and impoverishment among racially discriminated migrants. This occurred across the world, to Asians, but also, within Asia, to Asians and to Africans.

However, as Ang (2018) argues, most debates around race still hold in place a White/non-White binary and an imaginary that this is underpinned by the histories of South–North migration. Yet, migration is now much more distributed with regional hubs in all continents. Asia, in particular, has become an important destination for intra-regional and inter-continental flows and new inter-racial encounters as Asian economies have grown in global importance.

But what exactly is new about race, racism and migration in Asia and why does this matter? These are the questions that this paper addresses. In doing so, it draws on and summarizes some of the empirical variations outlined in a series of thought-provoking papers at the workshop New Racism and Migration: Beyond Col our and the "West" held in Singapore in January 2020. In responding to those provocations, I ask whether it is the qualities of racism that make it new, or the site of racism under discussion, Asia. The paper argues for the latter but suggests that to draw out new insights from the context of Asia, scholarship needs to attend to three sensibilities. First, it requires a sensibility to the materialities of race, to how it is materially embedded in the body, how these bodies are entangled and made through variegated capitalism and to how theories of race are themselves materially situated within the conditions of racism and anti-racism. Secondly, race has to be contextualized for and in Asia, i.e. to recognize what is different about Asia, but also how race in Asia is entangled with global racism. For instance, whiteness is a powerful globally circulating value which influences Asian racism. Finally, it suggests the need not only for situating race but also for building anti-racist coalitions in theory and practice and using these to inform where and how race matters.

New racism?

For many parts of Asia, which had been brought under direct or indirect colonial rule, or had become part of imperialist hegemony, colonial difference and

the attendant racism has always been produced in quotidian ways (see Koh and Sin 2021; Rocha and Yeoh 2021; Ang and Colic-Peisker 2021). However, race has also played a part in building alliances. For instance, race dogma was mobilized by the Axes powers to justify Japanese participation in World War II; they were "nominated" as "yellow Aryans" by the Germans (Padover 1943). European countries co-opted Asians to further their own local and global power struggles and in these moves, biological characteristics, such as purity of bloodlines, were used to define race and to justify colonialism and fascism.

Since the 1970s, this biologically determined understanding of race has been questioned, sometimes overturned. As de jure racial equality legislation was being rolled out in some countries of the global North, anti-racist research highlighted how racism still persists despite these "wins". Researchers argued that although racism based on bloodlines was now facing legal challenges, habits and dispositions continued to remain important bases for racist thoughts and actions. As a result, the literature on race focused on how race is also culturally constructed, and how this "new racism" involves discrimination based on attitudes, practices and values in everyday places and spaces (Essed 1991). For instance, Patricia Hill Collins (2004) argued powerfully, in the context of racism in the US, that what is new in "new racism is the changing influence of Black popular culture and mass media as sites where ideas concerning Black sexuality are reformulated and contested" (121). Anti-racist work therefore focused on how behaviours and activities have been inappropriately attributed along racial lines and the problems of aligning culture and race. This "new racism" argument was, however, challenged by those who felt that legislation had not really delivered adequate or meaningful change and that de jure definitions of race had always been influenced by cultural practices and stigmatization. Thus, they argued, neither had old racism disappeared, nor was the new racism particularly new (Leach 2005). Cultural practices that go beyond colour were seen to have been a constituent part of racism for a very long time. Collins also highlights how new racism, like old racism, has been a political-economic process and has always manifested in intersectional ways. Finally, the political, economic and social resilience of race and racism is apparent everywhere, albeit in locally variable ways.

Much of this history is based on my academic location – Western Europe, itself influenced by US research. There are other beginnings too. For instance, Kawai (2015) analyses how biological and cultural racism took very different forms over time in Japan, influenced by Western notions of race. Kawai points to how sometimes they were produced relationally, to distinguish Japan in terms of a nationalist project, to distinguish Japan from other East Asian neighbours, to enhance its own imperial ambitions and to revert in the

post war period to ethnicity as a way of distancing itself from the racism of the Second World War. Race thus mutates over time in place.

The workshop in Singapore, and this ensuing special issue, takes an important step in deepening such analyses of race through examples and insights from several specific locales – different parts of Asia. First, it complements and supplements debates on race and racism that are largely shaped by the White/non-White binary and arising from European colonial expansions by looking at how race is produced in other parts of the world beyond this binary. For Ang (2021), for instance, "Chinese" was used as a category in order to bring peasant and king together, within an empire. It assembled people into groups so that it became easier to distinguish those who were Chinese from those who were not. In doing so there was an erasure of plurality amongst those "within" in order to produce a singular race (also see Hough 2021; Tsuda, this issue). Race here does internal work producing an imagined homogeneity and erasing class differentials. This is a useful reminder as this is also often how race is mobilized by several populist governments globally today.

Secondly, this issue highlights the nature of comparison inherent to racialization, i.e. that race is usually produced in relation to other races. For instance, Ang (2021) points out that race consciousness was produced to affirm and strengthen the imperial power of a single empire but in the context of competing empires. Populations were sorted and classified in order to secure imperial hegemony. This points to the value of a comparative approach, which is also furthered in the work of Ho and Kuthiravelu (2021). They highlight two forms of comparison – between different groups of migrants as they sequentially settle, and between nations and cultures that are temporalized as backwards/progressive through a developmental lens as necessary for understanding race and racism. Hence comparativism is accompanied by hierarchization. Migrant groups, the nations they come from and the nations they settle in all are racialized differentially (also see Ang and Colic-Peisker 2021). Crucially, racism does not only differentiate and discriminate between migrants and non-migrants but also between different groups of migrants. Those who come later may be seen as new migrants and marked with scorn as they are seen as "not adequately integrated". However, these racializations of new migrants can be reversed where older migrants were working class and new migrants are selected for their skills and usually come from the middle and upper classes. Class often operates here not only as position but as dispositions and performance which are imbued by modernity, especially Western versions of modernity. Hence, race is classed and is also subtended by how race is read and understood globally. For Ho and Kathiravelu (2021), racial superiority then draws on notions of cosmopolitan identity and universal belonging. The more the spatial stretch of your identification and whom you are able to identify

with, the greater it translates into racial superiority. Thus a comparative lens not only has to focus on comparisons between different groups and nations, or over time but also be cognizant of the subtext around race and class through which aspirations are shaped and norms set, often by invislbe actors who have however laid the conditions for how racial superiority is established and validated. They shape the debate without always being obviously present.

Thirdly, the papers remind us that race and racism is deeply entangled with mobility. Migration has played an inordinate role in producing racialized categories as many of the authors in this special issue point out. For instance, it is not only where migrants come from but also how long they have stayed in a country which hierarchizes them. Race today, in the context of a rapidly shifting migration landscape, is therefore produced through collectivities – affiliations and networks which are pulled into co-ethnic identifications and dis-identifications. Other forms of aggregation, such as nation and religion intersect those of race (see Chee, Yeoh and Lai 2021). They become both sites of holding together but also boundary making as each person has multiple identities and so people may align on some bases but distinguish themselves on others. Not all these collectivities are demographic or primordial – they can also be based on trajectories of past mobilities and aspirations about future physical and social mobility. Hence, the class mobilities of certain groups can racialize those groups in positive ways and can provide the basis for cross-ethnic affiliations. But these collectivities are always partial, as each collective is also divided by other categorical differences, including gender and class (see Hough 2021; Rocha and Yeoh 2021).

Finally, the special issue explores how race is performed through intricate combinations of factors such as skills, class, cultural difference and nation. It highlights that not all forms of difference are inherited; some are acquired through vectors that shape and are shaped by the body in interesting ways. For instance, skills are not natural or obvious, but people are often racialized through skills (see McKay 2021; Tsuda, this issue; and for an extended discussion see Raghuram 2021). They are geopolitically coded and ascribed differentially based on colour. They have geographical referents that hierarchize people, places and credentials. Thus, similar caring activities done by Filipina women and Bangladeshi women in Dubai are differentially acknowledged as skills, and therefore differently rewarded (Kofman and Raghuram 2015). Skills as a classed phenomenon is inhabited and inherited. Cultural differences in language, cultural knowledges, food and clothing are sometimes chaotically put together to mark people as raced but also classed and to discriminate. Moreover, racialized people invest in and differentiate amongst themselves including along class lines as they incorporate hegemonic classed understandings of colour, nation and belonging. Hence, there is no non-racialized ground on which to debate racism.

These different definitions and manifestations of racism add rich new texture to discussions of race and racism globally. Conceptually, it builds on existing theorizations of race by those writing on "new racism" that went beyond colour. Many of these forms of distinction and discrimination that show how race is performed and performative through collectives also add further insights to studies of race that distinguish between White and non-White. However, arguably, it is the commonality that Asia provides that distinguishes racism *in* Asia, rather than against Asians and in the next section I outline what this issue provokes as thoughts about Asia as a particular and important site in which to discuss racism.

New Asia?

Race has a place dimension (Jackson 2002; Kawai 2015). Race and racism, their historical legacies, the grounds through which they are entangled with other concepts such as belonging, citizenship, ethnicity and with processes such as colonialism and slavery, vary hugely between nations and across continents. These multifaceted processes are also played out everyday in place as race divides spaces and place as several papers in this issue show. The creation of zones, enclaves and ghettoes in cities, as well as the differential use of place and space in schools, homes and public places all help to secure racial differences. Place matters.

Asia, as site for discussions of racism, therefore offers a different form of newness (Ang 2018). Settler colonialism by European colonizers has been much more limited in Asia, so the White/non-White binary as the primary marker of racial discrimination has a different resonance in Asia than it has in many other parts of the world. However, the long histories of both pre-colonial migration and intensified, orchestrated migration shaped by colonial policies such as indenture in the past, but also labour migration today, has left a complex mosaic of groups with differential political and economic statuses (see Ho and Kathiravelu 2021). Thus, Asia, arguably, has a different complexion to its racial hierarchization, which has emerged sometimes in parallel and unconnected to Western racisms, but sometimes entangled with it. The territoriality of race, i.e. its spatial attachments and complexities offers interesting and important perspectives. It shows different lines of inheritances of race and racism – individual and national – and how the two are entangled. It invites a genealogical analytical approach to race which explores different starting points for thinking race.

The histories of bordering and of colonial grab by competing European powers are very different in Asia than in Africa. Moreover, as we saw earlier, countries in Asia have their own brand of racial distinctions and discriminations based on the growth of Asian empires and their distinctive

qualities. However, the role of the Chinese or Ottoman empires in shaping race in East and West Asia respectively rarely gets the attention that it deserves. For instance, Chinese and indeed other Asian countries are

> constituent parts of the global racial hierarchy … the fact that China and diasporic Chinese communities have historically been racialized by others does not mean that China does not have its own racial imaginings; nor does it mean that such race thinking is static. (Huynh and Park 2018, 159)

Reinforcing this is an important intervention.

Asia also offers an interesting set of conundrums for thinking through relations between race and temporality. As many of the papers in this special issue show, the transience of migrants is often the basis for their racialization. Some migrants are marked for being transient, i.e. not showing commitment to "integration", while others are feared because they might settle (Tsuda, this issue). Student migrants were often left out of discussions of migration as they were seen as transient. The usual questions of how to incorporate migrants into existing racial orders were not often posed in the context of student migration. Yet, international students, the most transient of migrants, have suffered unprecedented degrees of racism in many countries across Asia as they became a marked category (Lee, Jon, and Byun 2017). Transience does not provide an escape from racism; it can accentuate it. These differential temporalities and their role in shaping racism are particularly pertinent for researchers in Asia, as it is the largest sender of international student migrants globally.

On the other hand, neither does length of stay provide any protection from racism, one shared with many other contexts and continents. Indigenous populations are often discriminated against in Asia as elsewhere. Length of period of occupation does not provide authentic belonging or protection from racism. Rather, race is often operationalized against these indigenous populations. But the difficulties of bringing the treatment of indigenous people onto the political agenda – i.e. to recognize this as racial discrimination – is a particular flavour of Asian racism (Chakma and Jensen 2001). While questions around race and racism in many parts of the world centre around discrimination of indigenous populations, this has been much harder to bring to the table in Asian discussions of race. These complex entanglements of temporality and race need further attention in research on racism in Asia.

Building new insights: making race matter

In this last section, I want to argue for three ways forward in conceptualizing racism in Asia: engaging the materialities of race in Asia, recognizing the entanglements of this situated race with global manifestations of race and

racism and the importance of thinking race through anti-racism, i.e. seeing race as produced materially through anti-racist practice.

I begin by suggesting the need for further engagement with the *materialities* of race in three ways, through the body; the materialities of capitalist patriarchal formations that shape bodily inhabitations; and the materialities that produce race theory. First, race is a bodily matter. In Asia, as elsewhere, race is marked by bodily performances and characteristics. There is no getting away from the fact that the body is the matter through which racialized social and cultural discourses are played out. Thus, race is not only a social construct. As Rigg (2008) argues "although it must be recognised that racial categories are the result of particular power relations and histories of oppression, they are nonetheless constructed as mattering – they are accorded a materiality that renders them foundational to subjectivities". Racism is anchored in materialities. We need better conceptualization of how and where race materializes, especially as the body as matter becomes entangled with other matterings, from the genetic to the digital, that sort, categorize and produce racialized ways of knowing the world. Phenotype matters as do the materialities of racialized knowledge production (Saldanha 2006). Second, race is produced in and through its entanglements with other forms of power such as capitalist patriarchy. Here, we might want to ask how is racism in Asia produced in and through its relations with, say, the Chinese variant of capitalism. For instance, in some cases, the return to more structural analysis of race might well be appropriate as the economic power of China and race becomes tied together (Ang and Colic-Peisker 2021). How does this play out in class inequalities and how is class racialized? Moreover, how do these relate to the complex mosaic of patriarchal formations in Asia? Race does not exist outside of these entanglements, which provide it with specificity, not only ideationally but also materially. Third, as Pitcher (2008) argues, there is a materiality to theorizing race. It arises in and through contexts. Asia has provided a rich home not only for empirical studies of topics such as migration, but also for their theorizations (Asis, Piper, and Raghuram 2019). The question of race theory needs to take account of its situatedness, i.e. why and where does race matter in Asia. Social constructionist theories of race have highlighted how race is not biologically distinctive but produced through discursive and social practices. These theories did particular anti-essentialist work during the 1970s and 1980s (Pitcher 2008). Today, racial discrimination is no longer the same, as neither racism nor political activism around race coheres in the same ways. Race theory has to deal with the materialities of the present. We need new race theories if we are seeing new racisms and these have to attend to the different material configurations of race and racism in Asia today.

Second, Asia can sometimes be produced as a space of difference through claims that it is a unique space, or is home to unique experiences (Chen 2010).

Yet, the materialities of the body, capitalism and patriarchy exist in a world of circulating values. White lives matter disproportionately everywhere, and this is the challenge that the Black Lives Matter movement struggles against. Black Lives Matter has reignited new debates on the importance of the history of slavery in producing Black lives and how Black lives have been seen in racist societies as disposable. Even Black people know that politically, economically and judicially, Black lives don't matter; their lives are less valued and their deaths less mourned – that is why there are so many murders of Black people including by other Black people.

The value of White authority and power is circulated through popular media which feeds racist (and anti-racist) thought. Black people do not exist outside of these forms of mediations. This shared discursive space and its problems were particularly apparent in India during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement in May and June 2020. Actors from the famed film industry, "Bollywood", who had participated in brand endorsement of bleach-based products to lighten skin climbed onto the Black Lives Matter bandwagon but were called out for their double-standards. They appeared to want to claim an ethical stance in unison with global voices but were not only reluctant to speak out against racism at home, but also directly benefited from endorsing shadeism. While global audiences, seeking to view Bollywood through its own racialized lens, have been quick to pick up these acts and (rightly) condemn them, what they fail to see is that many of these critics occupy a position of privilege themselves. For instance, the UK paper, the Daily Mail, was quick to criticize the Bollywood actors; this criticism does not arise from a place of ethical righteousness (Baker 2020). Rather, those who criticize are, very often, themselves beneficiaries (sometimes peddlers) of White supremacy.

This is not to point fingers. Rather, what this example shows is that racialized groups themselves incorporate hegemonic understandings of colour, nation and belonging. Whiteness thus has a circulating value which is beyond the reach of many non-White people, including those in Asia. Colour matters, even in Asia. So, perhaps, Asia is not beyond colour or even whiteness (see Koh and Sin 2021). This mode of thinking is not to deny empirical particularities but to ask more questions of when race appears distinctively and differently in Asia and what it shares with racism elsewhere.

Finally, if race is produced materially, it is also, as suggested above, produced materially in relation to *anti-racist activism*. Race may be an inadequate way of defining a collective in a biologically or socio-culturally coherent way, but there are moments when racism unites people into an anti-racist struggle. We have to garner anti-racism and anti-racist activities as a source of knowledge on how race matters and should be made to matter. Importantly, privileging anti-racist work also allows recuperation. This need for recuperation, and for the importance of coalition-building across anti-racist

struggles by scaling up in and through localized difference, has never been greater. Our understandings of race must appear through this coalitional politics, to foster and facilitate the politics of anti-racism. I hope my comments take some steps towards that.

Disclosure statement

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